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# ENGLISH FEELING TOWARDS AMERICANS.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

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THE perilous question whether the English like the Americans better than formerly is one which I hope to leave where I found it. An Englishman might counter by asking whether the Americans like the English better than formerly; but that would not be answering the question. Yet Americans have heard and read so much of their increasing national acceptance with their contemporary ancestors that they may be excused, if not satisfied, in a curiosity as to the fact. Is the universal favor which an emotional and imaginative press like ours has portrayed them as presently enjoying in England a reality; or is it one of the dreams which our press now and then indulges, and of which the best that can be said is that they do no harm?

## I.

One not only hears of this favor at home, but, when one goes to England, one still hears of it. To be sure one hears of it mainly from Americans, but Americans have the best means of knowing the fact; they are chiefly concerned, and they are supported in their belief by the almost unvaried amenity of the English journals, which only very rarely take the tone towards Americans formerly habitual with them. Their change of tone is the most obvious change which I think Americans can count upon noting when they come to England; and I am far from reckoning it insignificant. It did not happen of the newspapers themselves; it must be the expression of a prevalent mood, if not a very deeply rooted feeling, in their readers. One hears of their interest, their kindness, not from the Americans alone; the English themselves sometimes profess it; and, if they overestimate it, their generous error is in the right direction. At the end it must cease to be an

error, for, as we Americans all know, we need only to be better understood in order to be more highly prized. Besides, liking is much oftener the effect of willing than has been supposed.

But if the case were quite the contrary, if it were obvious to the casual experience of the American traveller or sojourner in England that his nationality is now liked less rather than more there, I should still be sorry to disturb what is at the worst no worse than a fond illusion. But the case is by no means the contrary; and yet, in consenting to some reason in the iridescence which the situation in the American fancy wears, I should wish to distinguish. For a beginning, I should not wish to go farther than to say, that the sort of Englishmen who have always liked Americans, because they liked the American ideal and the kind of character realized from it, now probably like them better than ever. They are, indeed, less critical of our departure from our old ideal than some Americans, perhaps because they have not foreseen, as such Americans have foreseen, the necessary effect in American character. They can still allow themselves the pleasure which comes from being confirmed in an impression by events, and in that pleasure they may somewhat romance us; but even such Englishmen are not blindly fond of us. The other sort of Englishmen, the sort that never liked our ideal or our character, probably now like us as little as ever, except as they have noted our change of ideal, and expect a change of character. To them, we may very well have seemed a sort of civic dissenters, with the implication of some such quality of offence as the notion of dissent suggests to minds like theirs.

But it is safe to conjecture that this sort of Englishman is too old, or too old-fashioned, to live much longer; he suffers with the decay of certain English interests which the American prosperity imperilled before it began to imperil English ideals, if it has indeed done so. His dying out counts for an increase of favor for us; we enjoy through it a sort of promotion by seniority.

But a new kind of Englishman has come up of late years; and, so far as he is friendly to us, his friendliness should be more gratifying than that even of our older friends. He has been in America, either much or little, and has come to like us because he has seen us at home. If such an Englishman is rich and noble, he has seen our plutocracy, and has liked it because it is lively and inventive in its amusements, and profusely original in its

splendors; but he need not be poor and plebeian to have seen something of our better life, and divined something of our real meaning from it. He will not be to blame if he has not divined our whole meaning; for we are at present rather in the dark as to that ourselves; and, certainly, no American who met him in England could wish to blame him at all, for his cordiality forms the warmest welcome that the American can have there. If he has been in America and not liked us, or our order or ideal, he has still the English good-nature; and if you do not insist upon being taken nationally, there are many chances that he will take you personally, and, if he finds you not at all like an American, he will like you, as he liked others in America whom he found not at all like Americans.

## II.

It is the foible, however, of many Americans, both at home and abroad, that they want to be taken nationally, and not personally, by foreigners. Beyond any other people, we wish to be loved by other peoples, even by others whom we do not love, and we wish to be loved in the lump. We would like to believe that somehow our sheer Americanism rouses the honor and evokes the veneration of the alien; and, as we have long had a grudge against the English, we would be particularly glad to forget it in a sense of English respect and affection. We would fain believe that the English have essentially changed towards us; but we might easily deceive ourselves, as we could realize if we asked ourselves the reasons for such a change.

The English are very polite, far politer than they have been represented to be; and they will not wittingly wound the American visitor, unless for just cause, like business, or the truth. Still, I should say that the American will fare best with them if he allows himself to be taken individually, rather than typically. One's nationality is to others, after a first moment of surprise, a bore and a nuisance, which cannot be got out of the way too soon. I cannot keep my interest in a German or an Italian because he is such; and why should not it be the same with an Englishman in regard to Americans? If he thinks about our nationality at all, in its historical character, it is rather a pill, which he may be supposed to take unwillingly, whether he believes we were historically right or not. He may say just things about it, but he will say them more for the profit of Englishmen than for the pleasure

of Americans. With our pleasure, nationally, an Englishman is very little concerned, and either he thinks it out of taste to show any curiosity concerning us, in the bulk, or else he feels none. He has lately read and heard a good deal of talk about us; but I doubt if it has indelibly impressed him. If we have lately done things which in their way could not be ignored, they could certainly be forgotten, and many Englishmen, in spite of them, still remain immensely incurious about us. The American who wishes to be taken nationally by them must often inspire them with a curiosity about us before he can gratify it.

### III.

The English have, or they often express, an amiable notion of us as enormously rich, and perhaps they think we are vain of our millionaires, and would be flattered by an implication of wealth as common to us all as our varying accent. But it is as hard for some of us to live up to a full pocket as for others to live up to a full brain. It is hard even to meet the expectation that you will know, or know about, our tremendously moneyed people, whose fantastic gorgeousness looms up across the Atlantic, from the cliffs of Newport or the millionaire blocks along Fifth Avenue. Here, indeed, is a curiosity which you do not have to inspire before you gratify it, for it exists already; while, as to our political affairs, or even our military or naval affairs, not to speak of our scientific or literary affairs, the curiosity that you gratify you must first have inspired. The glories of our triumphs over Spain, and our dazzling victories in the Philippines are already tarnished, but the splendid follies of our rich society are always fresh. Travelled Englishmen have come home and told of them; and is it all true?

Their curiosity on the point does not judge them, as might be supposed. The English are very romantic, with a young, lusty appetite for the bizarre and the marvellous, as their taste in fiction evinces; and they need not be condemned as sordid admirers of money because they wish to know the lengths it can go to with the people who seem to be just now making the most money. Their interest in a phenomenon which we ourselves have not every reason to be proud of, is not without justification, as we must allow if we consider a little; for, if we consider, we must own that our greatest achievement in the last twenty or thirty years has been in the heaping up of riches. Our magnificent success in

that sort really eclipses our successes in every other, and the average American who comes abroad must be content to shine in the reflected glory of those Americans who have recently, more than any others, rendered our name illustrious. If we do not like the fact, all that we have to do is to set about doing commensurate things in art, in science, in letters, or even in arms. For the present, we have not done them, or at least we are not doing them. The five-hundred-thousand-selling novel itself is a proof of our pecuniary, rather than our literary, prowess.

It will not quite do to say that the non-millionaire American enjoys in England the interest mixed with commiseration which is the lot of a poor relation of the great among kindly people. That would not be true; and, possibly, in the last analysis, the fact is merely that the name "American" first awakens in the English some such associations with riches as the name "South African" awakened before it awakened others more poignant and more personal. Already the South African had begun to rival the American in the popular imagination; as the Boer War fades more and more into the past, the time may come when we shall be confusedly welcomed as "Africans" or "South Americans."

#### IV.

If I were to offer what I have been saying as my opinions, or my conclusions from sufficient observations, I should be unfair, if not uncandid. The sum of what one sees and hears in a foreign country is as nothing to the sum of what one does not see and hear; and the immense balance may be so far against the foregoing inferences that it is the part of mere prudence to declare that they are not my opinions or conclusions, but are only impressions, vague and hurried, guesses from the cursory observations, deductions from slight casual incidents. They are mere gleams from social facets, sparks struck out by chance encounter, and never glancing lights from the rarefied atmosphere in which the two nations have their formal reciprocities. For all that I have really the right to say, from substantial evidence to the contrary, I might very well say that the English value us for those things of the mind and soul which we are somewhat neglectful of ourselves; and it is only their love of fairy tales which is taken with the notion of an opulence so widespread among us as to constitute us a nation of actual and potential millionaires.

They would hasten to reproach me, I am afraid, for speaking of England, though merely for purposes of illustration, as "a foreign country." One is promptly told that Americans are not regarded as foreigners in England, and is left to conjecture one's self a sort of middle species between English and alien, a little less kin than Canadian and more kind than Australian, though not equally within the scope of a preferential tariff. The idea has its quaintness; but the American in England has been singularly unfortunate if he has had reason to believe that the kindness done him is not felt. What has always been true of the English is true now. They do not say or do the thing which is not, out of politeness; their hypocrisies, if they have any, are for their God, and not for their fellow man. When they talk of their American brethren, they mean it; just as when they do not talk of them so, they mean something less, or nothing at all. The American who wishes to be taken nationally, may cordially trust any expression friendly to our nation that he hears; but, still, I think he will have a better time if he prefers being taken personally. That is really making one's self at home in a different, I will no longer say a "foreign," country; the English are eager hosts, and wish you to make yourself at home if they like you. Nationally, we cannot make ourselves, or be made, at home, except in the United States. To any other people, to people even sometimes claiming to be nearer than the first degree of cousinship, our nationality, taking it in bulk, is necessarily a mystery. We are so very like them; why should we be so very unlike them? The difference puzzles them, annoys them; why seek points of it, and turn them to the light? The same mystery distresses the Americans when the points of their own difference are turned to the light. A man's nationality is something he is justly proud of, but not till it is put aside can the man of another nation have joy of him humanly, spiritually.

If you insist upon talking to the English about American things, you have them in an unknown world, a really unknowable world, as you yourself know it; and you bewilder and weary them; unless they are studying Americanism, and then they still do not quite understand you. I say again that I do not know why any one should wish to be caressed for his nationality. I think one might more self-respectfully wish to be liked for one's self than joined with a hundred million compatriots, and loved in the lump. If the English, however, are now trying to love us nationally, we

should be careful not to tax their affections too heavily, or demand too much of them. We must remember that they are more apt to be deceived by our likeness to themselves than by our unlikeness. When an Englishman and an American meet on common ground, they have arrived from opposite poles. The Englishman, though he knows the road the American has come, cannot really imagine it. His whole experience of life has taught him that, if you have come that road, you are not the kind of man you seem; therefore, you have not come that road, or else you are another kind of man. He revolves in a maze of hopeless conjecture; he gives up trying to guess your conundrum, and reads into you the character of some Englishman of parallel tradition. If he likes you after that, you may be sure it is for yourself, and not for your nation. All the same, he may not know it, and may think he likes you because you are an agreeable American.

## V.

My line of reasoning, or I had better say of fancying, (that, on such dangerous ground, is safest,) is forcing an inference from which I shrink a little. But the candor which I would be so glad not to practise obliges me to say, that I think the American who is himself interesting would have been as welcome in England twenty-five years ago as at this day, and he would not have been expected to be rich, or to have the acquaintance of rich Americans. Already, at that remote period, certain fellow countrymen of ours had satisfied the English taste for wildness in us. There had been Buffalo Bill, with his show, and there had been other Buffalo Bills, literary ones, who were themselves shows. There had arisen a conjecture, a tardy surmise, of an American fineness then, which might be as well in its way as the American wildness; and the American who had any imaginable touch of this found as warm a liking ready for him then as the wild American found earlier, or the rich American finds later.

In fact, interesting Americans have always been personally liked in England, if I must really go to the extreme of saying it. What the English now all join in owning, if the question of greater kindness between the two countries comes up, is that their ruling class made a vast mistake in choosing, officiously, though not officially, the side of the South in our Civil War. They own it frankly, eagerly. But they owned the same thing frankly, if not



so eagerly, twenty-five years ago. Even during the Civil War, I doubt if an acceptable American would have suffered personally among them. He would have suffered nationally, but he has now and then to suffer so still, for they cannot have the same measure of his nationality as he, and they necessarily tread upon its subtle circumferences here and there.

From the very beginning of Americanism the case has been the same. The American in England during the Civil War was strangely unfortunate if he did not meet many and great Englishmen who thought and felt with him; and, if there were now any American so stricken in years as to be able to testify, from his own experience, of the English attitude towards us in the War of Independence, he could tell us of the outspoken and constant sympathy of Chatham, Burke, Fox, Walpole, and their like, with the American cause, which they counted the English cause. He could tell of the deep undercurrent of favor among the English people, which the superficial course of power belied, and at last ceased to control, in our earlier vital war, as well as in our later.

So much for that consideration of us nationally which I do not think England, in her quality of hostess, is bound to show her several American guests. I do not blame her that the sympathy of her greatest sons, so far as it has been shown us nationally, has been shown in her interest, which they believed the supreme interest of mankind, rather than in our interest, which it is for us to believe the supreme interest of mankind. Even when they are talking America, they are thinking England; they cannot otherwise; they must; it is imperative; it is essential that they should.

We talk of England on the same terms, with our own inner version. Once an eminent Englishman spoke, across the table to an American, of our Revolution as the "Rebellion." The American in return quietly said "Revolution," and the Englishman took instant note of the difference and did not fail afterwards to say "Revolution." I think the American was wise to consider that the word "Revolution," to that Englishman, could and did mean only the Revolution of 1688, when James II. was driven from power, and a new succession to the throne established.

## VI.

There is another point in this inquiry which I hesitate to touch, and which, if I were better advised, I should not touch; that is

the English interest in the beauty and brilliancy of our women. Their charm is now magnanimously conceded and now violently confuted in the public prints; now and then an Englishman lets himself go—over his own signature, even, at times—and denounces our women, their loveliness, their liveliness, their goodness, in terms which, if I repeated them, would make some timider spirits pause in their resolution to marry English dukes and run English society. But his hot words are hardly cold, before another Englishman comes to the rescue of our countrywomen, and lifts them again to that pinnacle where their merits, quite as much as the imagination of their novelists, have placed them. Almost quite as much as our millionaires, they are the object of a curiosity which one has not had to inspire. Where, in what part, in which favored city, do they most abound? What is the secret of their dazzling wit and beauty, the heart of their mystery? The most ardent of their votaries must flush in generous deprecation when these orphic inquiries flow from lips quite as divine as their own.

For the rest, if there is really that present liking for Americans in England, which we must wish to touch with all delicacy as the precious bloom of a century-plant at last coming to flower, the explanation may be sought perhaps in an effect of the English nature to which I shall not be the one to limit it. They have not substantially, so much as phenomenally, changed towards us. They are, like ourselves, always taking stock, examining themselves to see what they have on hand. From time to time, they will, say, accuse themselves of being insular; and then, suddenly, they invite themselves to be Continental, to be French, to be German, to be Italian, to be Bulgarian, or whatever; and, for a while, they believe that they have become so. All this time they remain immutably English. It is not that they are insensible of their defects; they tell themselves of them in clamorous tones; and, of late, possibly, they have asked themselves why they are not what they think the Americans are in certain things. If the logic of their emotions in this direction were a resolution to like all the Americans with a universal affection, I should admire their spirit; but I should feel a difficulty in its operation for a reason which I hesitate to confess: I do not like *all* the Americans myself.

W. D. HOWELLS.